

Executive Summary

This document provides an overview of conditions in the Mystic River Watershed, and presents an Action Plan for protecting and restoring the assets of its valuable urban natural resources. The report draws on the work of many people and groups, and it represents a work in progress. Much has been learned about the problems plaguing the watershed, as well as about its assets, which provides the basis for taking action to correct the problems and protect the assets. More investigation and monitoring are needed in some cases to identify pollution sources and to identify and evaluate solutions. However, the primary focus needs to be on taking specific action to improve water quality, reduce flooding and low flow problems, and enhance the land uses along the waterfront to support recreation and habitat. This report presents a shared vision of what needs to be done to protect and restore the resources of the watershed, and lays out a plan for accomplishing the required work.

The Mystic River Watershed is a heavily urbanized watershed located in the metropolitan Boston area that suffers from a long history of industrial pollution, urban nonpoint-source pollution, and combined sewer overflows. The Mystic River and its tributaries (Chelsea Creek, Malden River, Alewife Brook, and the Aberjona River) flow through some of the most densely-populated and industrialized communities in Massachusetts. The watershed is home to many low-income, immigrant and minority environmental justice communities, and has suffered significant neglect in the past. Restoration and protection efforts are complicated by the status of the lower part of the watershed as a designated port area. The waterbodies suffer from problems typical of urban, industrialized areas including (1) bacterial contamination (both dry- and wet-weather) from aging sewer systems, combined sewer systems, and stormwater runoff, (2) high nutrient levels throughout much of the watershed, (3) and leaching of toxic metals and organic compounds from hazardous waste disposal sites and contaminated sediments. Open space and access to the waterways are severely limited in many of the adjacent communities, and many residents no longer see the rivers as assets and are often even unaware they exist.

Mystic River Watershed – Satellite Photo



At the same time, the watershed has significant assets to preserve and build on, including state-owned parklands along much of the waterfront and in the Middlesex Fells and Belle Isle Marsh. Many elements of an integrated landscape of parks and pedestrian and bike paths are in place, and only need linking to create a superb urban waterfront resource for public access, commuting and recreation. The watershed is blessed with numerous local groups that advocate for the health and restoration of specific parts of the watershed. Major problems with urban run-off are beginning to be addressed through EPA and DEP

regulatory action and the Phase II Stormwater regulations. And the principles of Low Impact Development are beginning to be applied by municipalities in their local land use decisions. With better regional watershed-level planning and increased efforts to improve stormwater management and land use requirements at the municipal level, there is real hope for improving the condition of the watershed's resources.

The report provides an assessment of current conditions in the watershed, focusing on water quantity (flooding and low flow), water quality, land use and open space, recreation, and habitat. Based on this assessment, and on input from previous planning efforts and public input on the draft document, the report suggests priority goals for each area.

Chapter 8 of the report presents an Action Plan to achieve these goals. The Action Plan identifies high and medium-priority tasks, along with the parties responsible for undertaking those tasks and general measures of success in each area. Among the high priority goals and tasks are:

- Integrated regional planning and implementation to address interrelated flooding, water quality and low flow problems.
- Continued water quality monitoring and investigation, to identify sources of bacteria, ammonia, and nutrient pollution.
- Efforts to incorporate Low Impact Development and improved stormwater management practices into municipal land-use planning, regulation, operations.
- Regional planning for revitalization of the urban waterfront, balancing needs for improved public access, port uses, recreational activities, water-based transportation, and Smart Growth redevelopment.
- Education and outreach efforts to increase awareness of the watershed's assets and challenges, and to encourage public stewardship and advocacy on its behalf.

This Action Plan represents an important step in an on-going campaign to protect and restore a healthy Mystic River Watershed, though the coordinated efforts of many stakeholders.